

FACT SHEET

Status of Depleted Dolphin Stocks in the Eastern Tropical Pacific Ocean

Three dolphin stocks in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean (ETP) are recognized as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). They are the Northeastern offshore spotted dolphin, Eastern spinner dolphin and the coastal spotted dolphin. The Eastern stock of spinner dolphins and the Northeastern stock of offshore spotted dolphins have been the primary targets of chase and encirclement by the tuna purse seine fishery in the ETP.

Eastern spinner dolphin and the Northeastern offshore spotted dolphin stocks

The Eastern spinner dolphin and the Northeastern offshore spotted dolphin stocks are listed as depleted under the MMPA. At the time of listing Eastern spinner dolphin was estimated at approximately 44 percent of its pre-exploitation population size. The Northeastern offshore spotted dolphin was estimated to be between 19 and 28 percent of its pre-exploitation population size.

Information available as of March 1, 1999 on the current status of these stocks included absolute abundance estimates from research vessel surveys for 10 of the 21 years since 1978, relative abundance indices from tuna vessel observer data from 1975 through 1998 and fishery mortality estimates from 1959 through 1998.

New estimates of absolute abundance from 1998 research vessel surveys were 1,157,746 for Eastern spinner dolphins and 1,011,104 for Northeastern offshore spotted dolphins. Both stocks are still considered depleted as defined by the MMPA. While the recovery rate of the dolphin stocks may have been expected to be higher, based on historical data, the agency cannot conclude at this time that there has been a significant adverse impact on the depleted dolphin stocks due to chase and encirclement by the tuna purse seine fishery in the ETP.

The Act requires the Commerce Department to make a final finding between July 1, 2001 and December 31, 2002, to determine whether the tuna fishing practice of encircling dolphins has a significant adverse impact on any depleted dolphin stock in the ETP.

Coastal stock of spotted dolphins

In 1980, the coastal stock of spotted dolphins was first recognized as depleted under the MMPA. However, there is some ambiguity regarding the current status of this stock. These dolphins are found within 100 nautical miles of the coast in the ETP, and the stock is sufficiently distinct to be described as a separate subspecies. The 1998 abundance estimate for this dolphin stock was 108,289. Dolphins from this stock are among those killed incidentally in the tuna purse seine fishery, but the extent to which this mortality has affected the population is unknown. During the early years of the purse seine fishery, fishing effort was concentrated near the coast. Therefore, coastal dolphin stocks such as this one may have experienced high mortality.

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